

# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 An Uncertain Figure

The certainty that the historian derives from well attested events often comes as a great comfort, one which may make the student of the Dionysian corpus appear unduly ascetic. For despite a century's outpouring of ink, there is still rather little that we can claim to know with any degree of sureness about the face behind the mask of St Paul's Athenian convert, the author of five strange works who remains in the words of Dodds, an 'unknown eccentric'<sup>1</sup>.

Dionysius the Areopagite is mentioned by only two authors in antiquity, St Luke<sup>2</sup> and Eusebius of Caesarea<sup>3</sup>. The first names him as an Athenian convert of St Paul, the second - citing one of seven non-extant epistles of Dionysius of Corinth - as the first Bishop of the Christians of Athens. Clearly this amounts to very little. But perhaps significantly the letters of Dionysius of Corinth, written circa 170, are assigned great esteem by Eusebius. Firstly they are addressed to surprisingly far-flung communities<sup>4</sup>, but Eusebius also notes that their influence in the late third or early fourth century was sufficient to warrant heretical interpolation and circulation. He even preserves Dionysius' own censure of what was perhaps a Marcionite enterprise:

As the brethren desired me to write epistles, I wrote. And these epistles the apostles of the devil have filled with tares, cutting out some things and adding others. For them a woe is reserved. It is, therefore, not to be wondered at if some have attempted to adulterate the Lord's own writings also, since they have formed designs even against writings which are of less account.<sup>5</sup>

This last witness to textual interpolation adds a further grain to a curious cluster of issues - the epistolary activity of Dionysius of Corinth, his citing of Dionysius the Areopagite as the first bishop of Athens, Eusebius' assignment of authority to lost works, and pseudonymity - which all reflect aspects of the *Corpus Dionysiacum* (CD). Indeed it could be said that the silence of the Athenian church in the Apostolic age and

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<sup>1</sup> Dodds, E R, in *Proclus: The Elements of Philosophy*, ed & trans by Dodds, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, Oxford, 1963, pxxvi.

<sup>2</sup> Acts 17.34.

<sup>3</sup> *Ecclesiastical History* 3.4, 4.23, in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (2<sup>nd</sup> series) 1, ed by P Schaff & H Wace, Edinburgh, 1890.

<sup>4</sup> Letters noted as extant by Eusebius are to the churches in Sparta, Athens, Nicomedia, Gortys (southern Crete, site of Basilica of St Titus), Amastris, Knossos, and Rome. A further letter is addressed to Chrysophora, 'a most faithful sister', otherwise unknown.

<sup>5</sup> *Ecclesiastical History* 4.23.12.

its diminutive size through the early centuries of Christianity represents a vacuum waiting to be filled by a later writer under the guise of its first bishop.

## 1.2 Pseudonymity

As well as the general attempt to pass himself off as the Athenian convert of St Paul, the ruses used by Dionysius the pseudo-Areopagite (Denys<sup>6</sup>) include an allusion to his presence with St Peter and St James at the Dormition of the Blessed Virgin Mary<sup>7</sup> and his witnessing the solar eclipse at the hour of the Crucifixion<sup>8</sup>. Consistent in the masquerade are the recipients for his works and the audacious tone in addressing them. The major works are dedicated to ‘the fellow-priest Timothy’ whom he proceeds to instruct as though a subordinate. The letters are addressed mainly to Apostles and their disciples: John, Polycarp, Titus, Gaius and Sosipater. Only in respect of St John does Denys refrain from a didactic and authoritarian tone, but there remains a striking air of pomposity even in modern translation. The effect can at times seem quite preposterous.

Pseudonymity is, however, a complex issue involving anonymity and mistaken attribution as well as forgery and deliberate deception. It was an accepted literary form in parts of the ancient world for a disciple to publish under his master’s name<sup>9</sup>, a practice not always abhorrent to the Church. Early Fathers with a scholarly bent<sup>10</sup> refer to the Jewish pseudepigrapha and quote them, often noting that they are non-canonical<sup>11</sup>. In Greek literature especially, exercises in a particular style regularly took the name of the person being imitated: the *Epic Cycles* and other hexameter poems were attributed to Homer and short works by members of the Academy were composed under the name of Plato<sup>12</sup>.

The prevailing attitude towards pseudonymity in the early Church was, however, one of ambivalence, it often being lumped together with heretical intention as with Dionysius of Corinth. If identified, the true author’s punishment could be severe. For instance, Tertullian<sup>13</sup> claims that the second century composer of the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* was

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<sup>6</sup> We shall reserve the name ‘Denys’ for the writer of the corpus throughout.

<sup>7</sup> *DN* 3.2.

<sup>8</sup> *Ep* 7.2.

<sup>9</sup> Meade, D G, *Pseudonymity and Canon*, Tübingen, 1986, p9 notes this especially for the Pythagoreans.

<sup>10</sup> Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 5.54, also likewise Clement of Alexandria and Jerome.

<sup>11</sup> Knibb, M A, *Pseudepigrapha*, in *A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, ed by R J Coggins & J L Houlden, London, 1990, pp564-68.

<sup>12</sup> Barker, M, *Pseudonymity*, in *A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, pp568-71.

<sup>13</sup> Tertullian, *De Baptismo* 17, in *ANF* 3, ed by A Roberts & J Donaldson, Edinburgh, 1885.

convicted of forgery and deposed, the *Muratorian Canon* similarly censures the Epistles of St Paul to the Laodiceans and Alexandrians for Marcionite content<sup>14</sup>, and *Apostolic Constitutions* 6.16 condemns the poisonous works of ‘wicked heretics’ under the heading of ‘Books with False Inscriptions’<sup>15</sup>. There is some irony here since the *Constitutions* themselves have Arian content and almost certainly came from Syria, ‘the classic land of the false’<sup>16</sup>.

Theories offering a unified explanation of pseudonymity have often failed due to the diversity of the phenomenon. But a more eclectic approach, suggested by Brox<sup>17</sup>, emphasises the importance in the Early Church of three particular features of pseudonymity. Firstly there was a general ‘love of antiquity’: what was old was true - for both Christians and pagans - so that pseudonymity became the medium for participation in the *überlegene Vergangenheit*<sup>18</sup>. Secondly there existed a similarly pervasive notion of ‘noble falsehood’, especially in the Pythagorean and Platonist schools, which justified the means of falsehood in support of the end of religious truth<sup>19</sup>. Supporting this second principle is the third which asserts that, certainly until the fourth century, the Fathers’ viewed the content of a work as of far greater significance than the title.

In response to these principles we can assert that Denys exceeds all other writers in the daring of his synthesis of the Christian revelation and the late Athenian School of pagan philosophy. His dependence upon Neoplatonism has led to confident historical placement of the works *after* Proclus and as late as Damascius. Nevertheless, within such a novel enterprise he also shows a great regard for what is old and well-founded, some of which is surely inherited from his pagan sources.

The ascription of *CD* also carries a lingering impression of significance. It is as though for some reason one particular verse of Scripture crystallised for Denys the relevance of

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<sup>14</sup> Elliot, J K (ed), *The Apocryphal New Testament*, Oxford, 1993, pp543 *et seq*: the extant *Epistle to the Laodiceans* is a harmless cento; *Alexandrians* is not extant.

<sup>15</sup> *Apostolic Constitutions*, in *ANF* 7, ed by A R Roberts & J Donaldson, Edinburgh, 1886, 457.

<sup>16</sup> Stiglmayr, J, ‘Dionysius the Areopagite’, in *Catholic Encyclopedia*, online edn, (<http://www.newadvent.org>).

<sup>17</sup> Brox, N, *Falsche Verfasserangaben: Zur Erklärung der frühchristlichen Pseudepigraphie*, Stuttgart, 1975, cited in Meade, *Pseudonymity and Canon*, pp11-12.

<sup>18</sup> Brox, *Falsche Verfasserangaben*, pp105-06.

<sup>19</sup> This is seen by Brox as the motivation of Christian ‘counter-forgeries’ against heretics.

connecting Hellenistic philosophy and Christian thought. The appropriation<sup>20</sup> of the guise of the Dionysius from Acts 17.34 may be under the misapprehension that ‘Aries’ Hill’ was a place of philosophical learning when it was actually the ancient meeting place for a judicial oligarchy<sup>21</sup>. Nevertheless, the narrative of Acts introduces the votive altar inscribed ‘ΔΓΝΩCTΩΙ ΘΕΩΙ’, the importance of which resounds throughout the corpus.

### 1.3 *Authorial Objectives*

What then can be said of the nobility of Denys’ falsehood? Far fewer interpretations of intention have been put forward than theories of his identity<sup>22</sup>. Some indeed might argue that there exists little in the corpus from which a coherent purpose may be inferred. Here we shall outline in broad terms the main theories before identifying in a provisional way those elements which form a basis for this thesis.

#### *Denys the Christian (Neoplatonist)*

Campbell follows Westcott<sup>23</sup> in asserting the ‘historical dress is of a meagre texture’<sup>24</sup> and that Denys argues from Scripture, Tradition and reason rather than his own authority; the adoption of the persona of the Areopagite is not therefore in itself a sign of wilful dishonesty but rather suggests fairly plainly the spirit and object of the writer. Accepting the pseudonym as an honest literary device gives perhaps the most obvious of the possible objectives of Denys. He writes implicitly as a disciple of St Paul’s Athenian convert, from a learned pagan background, in order to encourage, instruct and discipline those already well established in the communities of the Early Church. He clearly sees great advantage for the Church in interpreting the central doctrines of the Christian faith - especially the Incarnation - in terms of the Neoplatonist reworking of Hellenistic philosophy.

#### *Denys the Monophysite*

Assuming a guise from the ‘superior past’, particularly of the Apostolic age, often indicates in the Early Church some vestige of a power struggle: the corpus, after all,

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<sup>20</sup> Denys never actually identifies himself with the Areopagite - hence ‘Denys the pseudo-Areopagite’ - although this is implicitly his intention.

<sup>21</sup> *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed by F L Cross & E A Livingstone, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn, Oxford, 1997, pp98-9 notes that under Roman rule it became increasingly concerned with religious issues.

<sup>22</sup> More than twenty conjectures are noted by R F Hathaway in *Hierarchy and the Definition of Order in the Letters of Pseudo-Dionysius*, The Hague, 1969.

<sup>23</sup> Westcott, B F, ‘Dionysius the Areopagite’, *Contemporary Review* 5 (1867), 1-27.

<sup>24</sup> Campbell, T L, *Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite: The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, Lanham, 1981, p11.

came to light in the midst of the Monophysite controversy. However, Campbell notes the view of Lebon<sup>25</sup> that Denys is a very poor Monophysite specimen, which suggests that if his purpose was to defend that party, his method was not simply to project questionable doctrine into the golden age of the Apostles. Denys' intention could rather be implicit in the evident influence of the *Henoticon* of 482, that of denying the ground for the conflict between Monophysites and Chalcedonians. His imprecision and neutrality on matters Christological matches the *Henoticon's* ethos of compromise and moratorium so further supporting a late dating for *CD*<sup>26</sup>.

### *Denys the Hellenistic Interpolator*

The objective of denying a ground for conflict in a context of controversy is also the central thesis of Hathaway<sup>27</sup>, not in an intra-ecclesial way, but between the belief systems of Christian and pagan religions. This is effected, he suggests, by the diffusion of Pauline Christian monotheism into Neoplatonist metaphysics, which effects the supplanting of Christian ἀγότη by Hellenistic ἔρως. It is a short step - for those who see in Denys nothing of concrete Christian experience<sup>28</sup> - to assert that the objective of *CD* is thereby the preservation of late Athenian Neoplatonism through the injection of its central features into a dominant 'host', the Church. This would still be consistent with the tradition of Platonist 'noble falsehood' and could be claimed to have been remarkably successful. However, no other example of such an implicit capitulation in pagan literature has been identified; representing - as it would - a 'last ditch' effort to preserve something of pagan thought and religious practice from oblivion would indicate something of the setting in which the corpus was composed: desperation.

### *Denys the Christian Interpolator*

The previous theory was more than familiar to Vladimir Lossky, being the dominant opinion of French scholars of his time. Nevertheless, he asserts in one of his under-read works<sup>29</sup> that the opposite is far more fitting: 'here is a Christian thinker disguised as a neo-Platonist, a theologian very much aware of his task, which was to conquer the

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<sup>25</sup> Lebon, J, 'Le pseudo-Aréopagite et Sévère d'Antioche', *Revue d'Histoire Ecclésiastique* 26 (1930), 880-915.

<sup>26</sup> Campbell, *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, p8.

<sup>27</sup> Hathaway, *Hierarchy*, pxiv.

<sup>28</sup> Vanneste, J, *Le mystère de Dieu: Essai sur la structure rationnelle de la doctrine mystique du pseudo-Denys l'Areopagite*, Paris, 1959, (cited in Hathaway, *Hierarchy*, pxv) famously writes 'on n'y trouve pas trace d'une expérience chrétienne concrète, mais seulement l'écho d'une technique néoplatonicienne bien rodée'.

<sup>29</sup> Lossky, V, *The Vision of God*, trans by A Moorhouse, New York, 1983, pp122-23.

ground held by neo-Platonism by becoming a master of its philosophical method'. A generation earlier Péra<sup>30</sup> argued similarly, mentioning the accusation Denys relates of himself in *Ep* 7 and his defence against the charge of being 'a parricide for making impious use of the Hellenes against the Hellenes'. More recently too, Pelikan<sup>31</sup> offers a similar digest of the Dionysian tension between Christianity and Neoplatonism, writing that 'in many ways Dionysius may be said to represent the effort, more or less successful, to spell out in greater detail the philosophical presuppositions that had been at work all along in the system of Cappadocian spirituality'.

Other explanations have of course been offered, but these four outlines begin to identify the areas that may be of greatest interest: the interplay between on one hand post-Cappadocian doctrine, spirituality and liturgy, and on the other the edifice of pagan philosophy as a system of thought and religious expression. Such a nexus concerns in no small part one of the great religious questions of the ancient world that is as relevant still at the beginning of the twenty first century, that of how the human person should combine regard for the spiritual and the physical aspects of life.

The tradition of the Early Church on this alone can seem a variegated spectrum bounded by rational and irrational extremes. But offering continuity with orthodox belief through many centuries, the sacraments of the Church have retained something acting as a 'protocol of idolatry', helping the Community of the Spirit to relate creatively both to the material universe and its transcendent Creator. *CD*, in providing a link between the late Antique and Byzantine views of sacramental life, also provides the first commentary on the rites of the Church emphasising the connection between the individual tradition of mystical ascent and its communal source and consummation, the Eucharist. In a time when more people are prepared to admit belief in prayer than in God, what could be more relevant an area for study?

#### 1.4 Procedure

Whichever of the outline suggestions above most suitably describes Denys' purpose, it seems clear that the period most valid for further investigation is that occupied by his Neoplatonist and Christian sources. This process begins in Chapter 3 with a comparison

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<sup>30</sup> Péra, C, 'Denys le Mystique et la Theomachia', *Revue des Sciences philosophiques et théologiques* (1936), p62, cited in Lossky, *Vision*, p122.

<sup>31</sup> Pelikan, J, intro in *Maximus Confessor: Selected Writings*, trans by G C Berthold, Mahwah, 1985, pp6-7.

of Denys' view of the soteriological relevance of the material realm with those of his pagan sources. Through observing his manner of dealing with the more dualist aspects of his sources, and the extent to which his Christian persona modifies them, we shall be more able to begin to judge in which area his purpose lies.

Moreover, the relationship between *CD* and the content of the various Christian and pagan works used in securing the pseudonymous identity of Denys has not always been explored very critically, especially in terms of ritual, divinisation, and the liturgical rites of *EH*. The intention of Chapter 4 is therefore to probe into this area, exploring key elements in the development of the language of divinisation, theurgy and *theôria*, and beginning to model the way in which they operate within Denys' liturgical system. A more thorough analysis of the *EH* rites is undertaken in Chapter 5, comparisons with other ancient liturgies being used to develop a basis for scrutinising the use of divinisation language.

In conclusion, Chapter 6 sets out an evaluation of the findings concerning Denys' sacramental theology, be it as a desperate and daring pagan theurgist or an eccentric and rather original Christian theologian.